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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the progress of six middle schoolers in the St. Louis public schools who had been placed in 6th grade even though they had only first grade-level reading skills. It seeks to answer the following question: What effect will the use of Reading Recovery techniques and individualized reading strategies have on middle school English language learners struggling to read English? During individualized tutoring sessions, the students were taught specific reading learning strategies, including the following: focusing on word families; rerunning, which involves reading a string of words or a whole sentence to capture the grammatical and semantic sense of the text; using context clues; and stressing the necessity that a text must make sense. Various types of reading were also used--independent, silent reading; echo reading; reading aloud; paired reading; and listening to taped books as students follow along in the text. The following conclusions were drawn: these students' attitudes about themselves as readers have improved; they no longer skip unknown words and have begun to use word family and context clues to help them make sense of print; their knowledge of sight words has increased; and their scores on a standardized reading test showed an average gain that was higher than that obtained by peers who did not participate in this project. (KFT)

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Action Research Project

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How does the use of Reading Recovery techniques and individualized reading strategies affect the reading skills of middle-school, second language learners?

No one will deny that reading well is the key to academic success, but it is often difficult to describe what the reading process actually is. Ken Goodman (1986) attempted to pinpoint the essential elements of this process called reading when he wrote, "Readers predict, select, confirm, and self-correct as they seek to make sense of print. . . Readers construct meaning during reading. They use their prior learning and experience to make sense of text." (p. 38)

Margaret Phinney (1988) echoed these elements in her book, Reading with the troubled reader. She explained that "reading is a highly complex language process, not simply a strict left-to-right decoding of letters to sounds. It involves several mental activities that take place almost simultaneously, bringing into use the many 'sub-stations' in the brain that are responsible for various aspects of reception, transmission, processing, association and expression." (pp. 6-7)

In addition, Marie Clay, (1993b) the founder of Reading Recovery in New Zealand, has her own version of what reading is. This is how she described this process:

> Reading, like thinking, is a complex process. The reader has to produce responses to the words the author wrote. In this way the reader has to match his thinking to the author's.
>
> You will be familiar with the old game "Twenty Questions" or

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> "Animal, Vegetable or Mineral." Reading is something like that game. The smarter readers ask themselves the most effective questions for reducing uncertainty; the poorer readers try lots of trivial questions and waste their opportunities to reduce their uncertainty. They do not put the information-seeking processes into effective sequences. (p. 9)

The common threads that run through these three descriptions include the following: (1) reading is a complex process; (2) reading requires the reader to interact with print to make meaning; and (3) it involves mental activities like using prior knowledge and experience to match the reader's thoughts to the author's.

From 1990 until 1998 it was my responsibility to teach culturally and linguistically diverse children from twelve countries how to read and write English. Some of these children became efficient readers after they had been in this country for a short time, while others--who were often illiterate in their first language--struggled to read and did not progress as quickly. With this latter group of children in mind, I decided to initiate an action research project in which my aide and I used Reading Recovery techniques with middle-school, ESOL students to help them improve their reading skills.

> This research was organized around one question:
> What effect will the use of Reading Recovery techniques and individualized reading strategies have on middle-school, ESOL students struggling to read English?

Methodology

The participants in this action research project were 6 ESOL students in an urban public school located in the midwestern United States. The student enrollment was

approximately 460 students. The majority of the students were African American (60%), and about 15% were students whose first language was not English. Approximately 90% of the students in the school received free or subsidized lunches. The six students who participated in this study demonstrated that they needed additional help in reading English. Three were males who were in the 8th grade; three were females. Two of the female students were in the 7th grade, and one was in the 8th grade. Four of the six students were illiterate in the first language, and the remaining two students had been in the United States for five years, but still experienced difficulty reading English. The amount of time which these six students had been in the United States ranged from one year to five years. We were very concerned about the students who had been in the US public education system for more than two years and were still having serious difficulties reading English. In addition to these students, we decided to include two students who had only been in the US for one year. We included them not because of the length of time they had been in this country, but because they came to our school after having received a very limited education in their native country. Even though they didn't know all the letters of the English alphabet, they had been placed in the sixth grade. We decided to include them in this project in order to accelerate their reading because they were going into the seventh grade with approximately first-grade literacy skills.

This action research project began in September, 1997, and ended in April, 1998. During this time, these six students received an individualized reading lesson from their ESOL teacher or ESOL teacher aide once a week for 45 minutes in addition to their regularly scheduled classes. During these individualized lessons, we taught these students specific strategies which they could use to help themselves as they read. These strategies included: (1) focusing on word families, (2) rerunning, which involves reading a string of words or a whole sentence to capture the grammatical and semantic sense of a text, (3) using context clues, including pictures, and (4) stressing the necessity that a text must make sense. We varied the type of reading in which the

participants engaged to keep their interest high. We used the following types of reading in these individualized reading sessions: (1) independent, silent reading; (2) echo reading in which the teacher read a sentence and the student repeated it; (3) reading aloud; (4) paired reading with the student and teacher taking turns reading pages in a text; and (5) listening to taped books as students followed in the text.

We also provided prompts to help the students make sense of their reading. As Fountas and Pinnell (1996) explained in their book, Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children, "reading is the construction of meaning. Comprehending is not a product of reading. It is the process. The child is continuously making sense of the world; when reading, he is making sense of text." (p. 156) In order to help our students make sense of the text before them, we used some of the prompts suggested by Fountas and Pinnell in their book. "Does that make sense?" (p. 161) was the prompt that we used most often.

Prior to the beginning of these reading lessons, the students expressed their feelings about reading in a 10-item survey that was administered again at the end of the project to find out if students' attitudes toward reading had changed from September to April. In addition, in September, I administered Dr. Marie Clay's Observation Survey to the students who participated in this research project. This survey consisted of six parts: (1) identifying the letters of the alphabet, (2) word recognition, (3) an investigation of a student's concepts about print, (4) writing as many words correctly as a student can write in a specific time period, (5) sentence dictation, and (6) a running record of a student's oral reading. In April, I administered the Word Test section of the Observation Survey again to determine any progress which the students had made since September.

I also recorded the students' perceptions of what makes a good reader by interviewing these students in late November and early December. In these interviews, students answered questions like "Do you think you are a good reader? How do you know? Do you know someone who is a good reader? How do you know that person is

a good reader? What do you do when you see a word you don't know? How do you decide what book you will read?" The answers to these questions provided us with invaluable information about what our students thought about reading.

Literature Review

Marie Clay, (1993a) the founder of Reading Recovery in New Zealand, defined Reading Recovery as an intervention designed to deliver reading instruction in a different way, in a one-to-one teaching situation. A number of research projects have been conducted since the Development Project of 1976-1977, in which New Zealand teachers agreed to teach 2 children to become better readers by teaching them reading strategies in a one-to-one setting. They agreed to engage in a year of detailed observation and record-keeping to track the progress of children who were experiencing problems in reading. In fact, in 1978 the Field Trial Research was conducted in which results of the previous year's work were studied. Attempts were made to demonstrate that the procedures used in Reading Recovery were applicable to a variety of school settings. In this study, attention was focused on the training of Reading Recovery teachers as well as other issues. As the study progressed, the teachers discovered that they were shifting their attention from teaching specific items such as letters and specific words to "developing in the child the willingness to use a variety of text-solving strategies." (1993a, p. 63) Clay reported the findings in this way: "Another feature of this shift was away from having the 'poor reader' dependent on the teacher and towards teaching in such a way that the child had many opportunities to teach himself something." (1993a, p. 63)

In the Three-Year Follow-Up, which was conducted by Clay and Barbara Watson in 1981, the researchers wanted to know if children who had participated in Reading Recovery in 1978 continued to progress with the average groups in their classes in

December 1981. They found that these ex-Reading Recovery children were at or above class level for age at the beginning of 1981. "It is clear that schools placed the ex-Reading Recovery children according to age for class in almost all cases." (1993a, p. 79) One of the aims of Reading Recovery is to teach children independent reading strategies which will help them to help themselves become better readers and rejoin an average group of readers in their class. This study was designed to see if that goal was being achieved, and the data supported this claim.

Finally, national monitoring of Reading Recovery took place from 1984 to 1988. By 1984, the Department of Education in New Zealand had expanded the program to reach 3,000 children. Since then, the program has been expanded further until it now reaches about 20 percent of the children in New Zealand. (Clay, 1993a) Participants in the program have made substantial progress since 1978, and Reading Recovery has won the support of teachers, principals, parents, and the general public in New Zealand.

The features of Reading Recovery that seemed applicable to the students in our action research project included the following: (1) we provided extra time to give students individualized help; (2) we taught participants specific reading strategies that were intended to help them help themselves to become better readers; (3) we began each reading session by having the students read books that had been part of the previous lesson; (4) we began the study by having the students respond to Clay's Observation Survey to see how familiar they were with print and to assess their literacy skills; and (5) we thoroughly documented students' progress via checklists, teacher observations, surveys, and interviews. Consequently, we decided to incorporate these features of Reading Recovery in our action research to help our limited English proficient students, some of whom were illiterate in the first language, to become more proficient readers.

Conclusions/Results

During the additional 45 minutes that we spent each week teaching reading strategies to these six students, we observed how they attacked unknown words and how they attempted to interact with the text to make meaning of the print. By January of 1998, we observed that the majority of these students no longer skipped unknown words. Now they were also using pictures as clues to meaning and using word structure clues to make sense of the texts they were reading. The observational checklists which we completed for these students provided evidence of these improved behaviors.

In addition, the interviews which we completed with five of the six participants in late 1997 revealed important information about the perceptions these readers had about good readers. We attempted to use the information they provided to help them become better readers. For example, the five students' responses to the questions "Do you think you are a good reader? How do you know?" revealed a common theme which ran through their answers. One student of the five responded that she was a good reader and said that the reason for her response was "I know the words.' On the other hand, four of the five students responded that they were not good readers. They provided the following reasons: "I don't know every word." "There are some words that I don't know." "I don't know lots of words." "I don't know how to read a lot of books, only some." When I asked these student if I, the teacher, knew every word that I encountered in books, all five students answered, "Yes." I then tried to convince the students that no one knows all the words and that there are strategies that we all use to learn new words so we can become better readers. I then concentrated my efforts on teaching them specific strategies on which we had decided to focus in this project.

Secondly, when the students were asked how they knew someone in their class was a good reader, two of the five answered that a good reader reads quickly. One student answered that a good reader reads loudly. Another said that good readers in

their classes didn't make mistakes while they were reading aloud. When I discussed these answers with the students, they reaffirmed that good readers exhibit confidence in their reading ability. Four of the five students I interviewed said they were not good readers. In these interviews, they said that they didn't exhibit the self-confidence that they believed good readers had.

In addition, when the students were asked, "What do you do when you see a word you don't know?", three students replied, "Skip it." Another replied, "Pass on to the next word. I try to pronounce it and keep on going." Two of the five students said to "ask somebody." I tried to use a discussion of these responses to show the students that there were specific strategies which could help them become better readers if they used them. With these strategies at hand to use as tools to improve reading, they could do more than skip the words and ask someone. They could empower themselves as readers.

Finally, I asked these students what would make them better readers. One of the students replied, "I don't know." Four replied, "Read more books." This attitude among the students made it easier to spend the extra time each week working and reading together. Very rarely did one of these students complain about spending this time practicing these reading strategies. Their actions were an indication that they really believed that reading more books would help them become better readers.

In addition to the checklists and the interviews, we also used surveys to collect data regarding the participants in this project and their reading habits. At the beginning of this action research project, the six participants completed a survey which dealt with their attitudes toward reading. At this time, 5 students (83%) agreed that they liked to read. One student was undecided. Also, 5 of the 6 students reported that they read better than they did last year. One student (17%) disagreed with that statement. Four of the students (67%) agreed with the statement, "Reading is really important in life." Two of the students (33%) agreed very much with this statement. When the students

were asked if they were good readers, two agreed; three students disagreed with this statement, and one disagreed very much (33% agreed; 67% disagreed.)

At the end of the project in April 1998, 83% of the students reported that they liked to read. One student disagreed. Also, 83% of the students reported that they read better now than they did last year. This time, however, none of the students disagreed with this statement, and one student agreed very much. The percentage of students who agreed that reading was really important in life remained the same as those reported in September. The really noticeable change in percentages recorded in the post-survey related to the statement, "I am a good reader." In the pre-experience survey, 33% of the students agreed with this statement. In the post-experience survey, that percentage increased to 50%; those who disagreed decreased to 33% from 67%; and one student (17%) replied, "Don't know."

In addition to these surveys, in April of 1998, we used the Word Test section of Marie Clay's Observation Survey to collect more data. We wanted to identify any changes in word recognition and any increase in vocabulary from September, when the study began, until April, when the study ended. In this section of the Observation Survey, students read words aloud from a word list. In September, five of the six participants read words from this section. Two students correctly read 14 words from the list of 15, and three students read 13 of the 15 words correctly. The sixth student did not take this section of the Observation Survey. In April, two students scored 100% on the same word recognition task; two students scored the same in both September and April; and one student increased his errors from 2 in September to 4 in April. In addition, in April, the students were asked to read all three word lists (45 words) that were available in the Observation Survey. At this time, one of the students correctly read 43 of the 45 sight words; two others read 42 correctly out of 45; another student read 41 out of 45; and the last student read 39 correctly out of 45. It is evident that even though the students were asked to read 45 words instead of 15, all of them were

able to accurately read a very high percentage of these sight words. In fact, the range went from a low of 87% to a high of 96%.

The final aspect of triangulation used in this project involved comparing the 1997 and 1998 reading scores of these students on the Language Assessment Scales, a nationally normed, standardized test designed by Duncan and D'Avila. This is the official test used by this school district to assess the reading and writing progress of ESOL students. The following are the scores of the six students who participated in this action research project:

	Reading 1997	Reading 1998	
Student #1	24	36	+12
Student #2	22	36	+14
Student #3	29	29	0
Student #4	36	56	+20
Student #5	38	42	+ 4
Student #6	40	44	+ 4

Three of these students showed substantial gains ranging from +12 to +20. Two students showed modest gains of +4, and one stayed the same. None of these students, however, showed any decrease from 1997 to 1998.

The scores of the remaining 40 ESOL students who were tested in 1997 and 1998 reveal that the average amount of gain in scores was +7, with 5 students reporting reading scores that stayed the same, and eight students with scores that decreased from 1997 to 1998, at an average of -5.7. In addition, of the nine students who scored the highest gains (20 points or more), one was a participant in this project. It is evident

that the gains made by three of the six participants in this project were considerably higher than the average (+7) gain of their peers who did not participate in this project.

Implications

This study has provided us with a wealth of information about these students. We now know their perceptions of themselves as readers and their ideas about how good readers behave. In addition, we have used Reading Recovery techniques with these ESOL middle-school students to teach them specific strategies on a one-to-one basis to show them how to empower themselves as readers.

In conclusion, at the beginning of this action research project, we wanted to answer this question: What effect will the use of Reading Recovery techniques and individualized reading strategies have on middle-school, ESOL students struggling to read English? As a result of this study, we have found that these students' reading skills did improve over the eight months in which we conducted this action research. The data analysis has resulted in the following conclusions: (1) these students' attitudes about themselves as readers have improved; (2) they no longer skip unknown words, and they have begun to use word family clues and context clues to help them make sense of print; (3) their knowledge of sight words has increased; and (4) their scores on a standardized reading test showed an average gain (+9) which was higher than that obtained by their peers who did not participate in this project.

The Reading Recovery techniques and the individualized reading strategies that were intricately involved with them in this study have had a positive effect on the students in this action research project. These students have increased confidence in themselves as readers, and they now know and use specific reading strategies that will make them less dependent on their teachers and more self-sufficient readers. We are

confident that other action research projects involving second language learners will also help this ever-growing student population. Hopefully, our project will convince other teachers to asses their ESOL students' language needs and address them with action research.

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